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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 DUSHANBE 001613

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SUBJECT: TEN WEEKS TO ELECTIONS, TAJIKISTAN MOVING SLOWLY TO
IMPLEMENT CHANGES

REF: A) DUSHANBE 960 B) DUSHANBE 1599 C) DUSHANBE 1587

CLASSIFIED BY: Tom Hushek, Charge d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy,
Dushanbe, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Ten weeks out from the November Presidential election, Tajik authorities are moving very slowly to implement improvements to the electoral process. After a significant step forward in May, when Tajik authorities presented donors with a the first government plans to address previously election inadequacies, the Central Committee on Elections and Referenda (CCER) has largely been working behind the scenes with NGOs and donors. IFES, the UN and OSCE are pushing the CCER to issue a decree on the conduct of the election, but the ball rests with the CCER, which may not have much power without a distinct directive from the President's office. Top advisors to the president acknowledge the importance of holding a more transparent election, but seem more concerned with checking boxes on a checklist for international approval than strengthening the actual process. They do not seem to understand the structural changes to make an election more fair and transparent, including media access and an election campaign free from pressure or government intimidation. The election support funds Post requested in May have yet to make their way to Tajikistan, and few other donors plan to invest in an election where the result is a foregone conclusion. Post still believes it is in our and Tajikistan's interest to train officials and an electorate in proper election procedures, in preparation for a day when the race is truly open. END SUMMARY.

VERY SMALL STEPS

12. (C) Since a May 17 meeting presented international donors

with a very concrete set of actions to improve the election process (Reftel A), movement on election issues has been slow and almost entirely behind-the-scenes. United Nations Tajikistan Office of Peacebuilding (UNTOP) held a July 27 roundtable with the President's Center for Strategic Research (CSR), the CCER and political parties to discuss a possible decree to be issued by the CCER prior to the elections. The decree would offer district-level election commissions specific guidance to implement better practices on election day. The decree belongs to the list of changes identified by CCER, IFES and CSR, in response to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) criticisms of the February 2005 Parliamentary elections. After the July 27 meeting, UNTOP told other donors the ball was "firmly in the CCER's court" to release a statement on the election. In late August/early September, the CCER expects to send to parliament a decree to institute changes in the election procedure after conferring with the political parties.

13. (SBU) In early August, OSCE gave the Tajik authorities an assessment on the Law on the Election of the President, which the Tajik Parliament amended in January. The assessment criticized the law for restricting campaign free speech and imposing overly strict requirements for candidates. The OSCE assessment recommended a number of new amendments to the election law, to provide non-partisan domestic observers; an independent, pluralistic election administration; fair allocation of state resources to candidates; and improved process of verifying signatures to nominate a candidate.

CHAIRMAN BOLTUYEV

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14. (C) CCER Chairman Boltuyev had difficulty articulating the changes his agency had already implemented, or the general CCER goals for the November election. In an August 18 meeting with Deputy Assistant Secretary Feigenbaum and PolOff, he stressed the CCER's independence and the autonomy of the individual district election commissions, separate from the Presidentially appointed local government. He noted Parliament would convene August 31 to set the official date for the Presidential election - most likely November 6. When DAS Feigenbaum repeated the question about the changes CCER hoped to make, Boltuyev only mentioned attempts to eliminate "family" voting, where the male head of the family filled out ballots for multiple registered voters. Boltuyev hinted that the CCER would issue procedural guidance to local level election officials, but offered no comments on the action plan developed with IFES and CRS.

15. (C) Boltuyev faulted the OSCE for issuing their report on the February 2005 election "six months later" and not identifying the specific polling stations where violations occurred. "They should have come to us that night, so we could immediately correct the mistake." He also criticized the OSCE's assessment, noting "the CCER cannot just change the law." (NOTE: He's correct. END NOTE.) Despite several leading queries, Boltuyev did not mention his work with IFES, which has been a driving force behind the matrix of changes to be implemented before the election. He made no mention of scheduled poll-worker trainings or voter education, as the CCER previously proposed to donors.

16. (C) In a series of unrelated comments, Boltuyev thanked the United States for its support, went into details about the mechanics of getting 3 million registered voters on the voting

rolls and to the ballot box and emphasized the close working relationship with UNTOP. He rejected the offer of additional material support or funding, even when the offer was restated so as to be clear that there could be funding to help with the balloting. His deputy Dodjonov, sitting next to him, quickly interjected that the CCER could indeed use assistance with some publications, including 40,000 copies of the election laws and constitutions. Boltuyev emphasized the need for observers, and closed the conversation by asking "Why would we violate (international standards)?"

17. (C) An NGO director and UNTOP head Ambassador Sotirov told PolOff in later conversations that Boltuyev was drunk on the job with increasing frequency. Sotirov noted that Boltuyev often called him for drinking binges. "I give my liver for democracy!" he smiled, in order to maintain the working relationship with the CCER. The NGO head reported that the CCER tried to maneuver events so that Boltuyev gave prepared remarks, and then left the floor and the work to Dodojonov and other department heads. The NGO head noted that after Boltuyev's wife passed away, he became an alcoholic and Dodojonov runs the CCER with Boltuyev only as its chairman by name. The NGO head also commented that CCER has tried to keep its activities with the NGO and political parties very quiet, until they can formally announce the decree.

WE WANT CLEAN ELECTIONS

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18. (C) CSR head Suhrob Sharipov told PolOff August 19 the government wanted to have a "clean" election-and President Rahmonov himself had told his administration that the balloting was supposed to follow international standards. "We must do away with family voting, and make sure that every local election official understands that the President wants them to follow the rules." Sharipov acknowledged that in a culture where connections were everything, no local official wanted his district to be the one that delivers less support to the President. "The President has gotten a good chuckle out of the Americans telling him he doesn't need 99 percent of the vote," said, Sharipov, possibly referring to Presidential Advisor on Economics Davlatov's meeting with former-DAS John Gastright in Washington in April.

19. (C) Sharipov predicted Islamic Renaissance Party acting chairman Muhiddin Kabiri would run against Rahmonov (Reftel C). When pressed about access to the media and state television for any opposition candidates, Sharipov appeared thoughtful, but somewhat unconvinced it was a necessary step. "The President is really popular," he noted. "He has done so much for this country. We know he's going to win." Like Boltuyev, Sharipov was reticent about collaboration between his Center and IFES on election reform

COMMENT:

110. (C) Although the CCER may have cooperated with international organizations, it is clear that it has limited authority. In Tajikistan, particularly with the presidential election, top government officials are still in firm control.

¶11. (C) Sharipov and Bolutyev's comments suggest the Tajik authorities are very interested in appearing to make changes to win international favor, but may not entirely understand why certain reforms have been recommended. In Tajikistan's unsophisticated democracy, focus is still on rectifying culturally-based violations like family voting, or absentee voting, rather than understanding and undertaking structural changes needed such as creating more independence from government pressure and a fair campaign season.

¶12. (C) Sharipov's thoughts echoed a later statement by Presidential Advisor Rahmatulloyev (Reftel B) on the danger of political irrelevance for any opposition candidate, in light of Rahmonov's overwhelming popularity. For Sharipov and Boltuyev, a clean election seems to be a hoop to jump through for an international audience, not something that could benefit their own institutions.

¶13. (C) The clock is ticking, but reform is slow and underfunded. Funding from Post's May request for election support has yet to be hit the ground (Reftel A) and few other donors, aside from UNTOP and OSCE, plan to invest in the election. Although the result may be a foregone conclusion. Post still believes it is in the U.S. and Tajikistan's interest to help the CCER train its poll workers and the electorate, in

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anticipation for a day when Tajikistan's political field is truly open. END COMMENT.

¶14. (U) DAS Feigenbaum did not clear this cable.
HUSHEK